Alba Pratalia

It's

Nathan was, just in that very absurd moment, as close to "content" as his organism, otherwise inclined to suspicion and acid reflux, could allow. The wine glass caught the lamplight like a blood-red compass needle trying to point him to a less ridiculous planet. Pinot Noir, fog valley, granite soil—he mouthed the words as if they were coordinates on a treasure map written by a sommelier.

On the plate, the goat cheese Welsh rabbit steamed its confession. The crust bubbled into browns the precise hue of a leaf abandoned on a park bench, one that had decided, heroically, to go out as fondue rather than mulch. Nathan raised his fork with the solemnity of a bishop elevating a chalice, then stabbed the bread as though it were the metaphysical problem of "being."

And from the old speakers—fuzzy, noble, not quite aligned in stereo—came Art Garfunkel. The man did not so much sing as levitate syllables. “Is it a kind of a shadow?” he inquired of the room. Nathan, mouth half-full of molten cheese, nodded. Yes, Art, yes it bloody well is. Everything is a kind of a shadow, except the wine, which is real enough to stain the tablecloth and maybe the soul.

In that moment—cheese stretching, glass sweating, Garfunkel wondering aloud if the whole of existence wasn’t just a dream—Nathan allowed himself to believe that absurdity might be the closest thing mortals ever get to happiness.

And that’s when the young man—poor devil, innocent vandal—committed the unspoken forbidden act. He spoke. And by speaking, shattered the carefully brewed alchemy of Garfunkel, goat cheese, and Pinot Noir. The words dropped like pebbles in a cathedral: vulgar, echoing, irreversible.

He held out his phone. On the screen, the glossy backside of a naked woman on a beach, the horizon blurred into something both eternal and deeply Instagram. Nathan, being Nathan, was always in the mood for the sight of a naked woman (he was not, after all, an ascetic monk—he drank Pinot Noir, which already gave him away). And yes: this one was attractive, luminous, sun-struck like a Botticelli who had wandered into an iPhone 13.

But the young man was not finished. He could not let silence perform its miracle. He had to say something. And what he chose to say was a crime against the moment:
"Finally, she has some cellulite too. Some orange peel. So she is human, after all."

Nathan turned his head slowly, as one might when discovering that the cathedral has been defaced not by graffiti, but by someone who thought themselves witty. He looked again at the screen, and it was no

longer a woman. It was a cut. A gash. A vertical slit in the canvas—Lucio Fontana whispering: the painting is no longer a surface, but a wound.

"So," Nathan asked quietly, chewing the last corner of melted cheese, "what am I supposed to do with it?"

And Garfunkel, as if summoned to judge the case, entered again from the speakers. His voice trembled like the last candle in a crypt:

Bright eyes, you had, young man, when I knew you, burning like fire…
Bright eyes, how can you close and fail?
How can the light that burned so brightly
Suddenly burn so pale?

The young man blinked, realizing for the first time that Nathan's silence had been a sacrament, and that he had blasphemed with cellulite.

Nathan stared at him, jaw slack but not in awe—more like a medieval saint contemplating whether martyrdom was truly worth the paperwork. He wondered if the young man had actually woken up that morning, stretched, yawned, scratched his balls, and declared: *"Today I shall test the tensile strength of human patience, specifically how much idiocy can be tolerated before someone rearranges my nasal cartilage."*

And the boy—ah, the boy—leaned forward with the gleam of a man proud to be plumbing the depths of stupidity.

"Do you like cellulite?" he pressed, as though conducting research for the Nobel Prize in Vulgar Anthropology. "Like… she's riding you reverse cowgirl. You see those cheeks wrinkling and bubbling in orange peel. You keep a hard on?"

Nathan set down the glass, flexing ever so slightly. In his head, he mapped the choreography: anterior

deltoid to lift, tricep to extend, wrist flick for the Pinot Noir splash, quadriceps in reserve for the follow-through. A sequence precise enough to qualify as an Olympic event: **Wine-Hurl, Idiot-Division.**

But then he remembered the vow—stupid, inconvenient, but binding—that he would treat this young man with some degree of patience, wound him as little as possible, and, against all odds, attempt to pass along something resembling knowledge. He unclenched. He swallowed the urge.

Instead, Nathan simply tilted his head, gave the boy a look that belonged on the face of a Renaissance martyr in stained glass, and said:
"Boy, if she promised she'd shower and fuck off after shagging, I'd fuck a Volkswagen Beetle leaking oil."

The room fell silent, except for Garfunkel whispering in the background, as though heaven itself were sighing: *"Bright eyes…"*

Nathan let his mind drift back, like a drunk librarian wandering the archives of flesh. There they were: the asses of history. The taut ones where you could bounce a coin and hear it ring; the soft, foldy landscapes that welcomed you like velvet armchairs; the dimpled cellulite fields glimmering like lunar craters; the scarred, spotted, wrinkled, pimpled terrain—every one of them lovelier than the other.

And none, *none*, as sublime as the moment when the woman turned around, climbed forward, and met him face-to-face. When she smiled down at him with her hair falling like curtains on a stage where only they performed. When she leaned in and let him lose himself, drowning, gasping, in the scent of her skin. When she balanced herself, breasts brushing his chest—big tits, small tits, sagging tits,

militant flat chests, even breasts swollen and dripping neonatal milk like an offering. Each pair a benediction. Each moment a gospel.

Nathan opened his eyes and regarded the young man, who still sat there like an unripe fruit in the basket of life. He promised himself that one day, when words could carve rather than bruise, he would explain it to him. He would explain *living*. He would explain *bodies*. He would explain that beauty is not found in the angle of light on the skin, but in the unrepeatable madness of two mortals colliding.

But not tonight. Tonight was Pinot Noir and Welsh rabbit and Garfunkel humming into the dim corners. Tonight was mercy. Tonight was restraint.

So Nathan speared the last triangle of cheesy toast, chewed with a slow defiance, popped the cork on the second bottle, and made the firm decision not to rearrange the boy's face into modernist cubism.

If you've ever been really, sincerely, freely, spiritedly young, there are things you'll never understand. Youth, real youth, is too busy sprinting, crashing, spilling beer on the carpet of time. It has no patience for the subtler registers of living. To know them, you must have been born old—must have carried the weight of bones at nine years old, a little pensioner in corduroy shorts, rehearsing sighs the way others rehearsed multiplication tables.

Only then can you appreciate the exquisite minor chords: when it isn't cold, yet your skin ripples with small goosebumps inside a sweater that's slightly too warm; when you're not pain-free, but the drugs have just unlocked a corridor of numbness and you lean against its walls like an exhausted traveler; when you're not drunk, but sobriety itself has quietly left town on a night train called *The City of New Orleans*—and by the time you look up, it's five hundred miles away, humming into the dark, taking

with it every sharp edge and clear thought, leaving you with something better: blurred mercy.

That's what youth doesn't get. That the sweetness isn't in the sprint. It's in the pauses, the goosebumps, the small dissolves into nothing. It's in noticing that the train is already gone, and you're still here—wine in hand, Garfunkel sighing, cheese congealing—half ghost, half god, entirely human.

The boy leaned in, reckless grin, and lobbed his grenade:
"Hey, how much would you like a blowjob right now?"

Nathan didn't flinch. He sipped his wine, let the tannins sit like lawyers debating in his mouth, then answered in the tone of a man commenting on rainfall.
"Hey, every man is always on for a blowjob. Always. Doesn't matter if he's in the receiving chair or down

there doing the giving—he's on. You might not be in the mood for a pussy ride, or sticking into an ass, or even, God help us, into a watermelon at peak ripeness. But a blowjob? That's universal. You can't fuck it up."

He tapped the stem of his glass, ticking points like a lecturer.

"Worried about going soft? Ha. Eighty-five percent of blowjobs *start* soft. Worst case, you stay soft, and what—she's chewing gum with different packaging? Still works. Can't cum? Ninety-five percent of blowjobs end in either: both parties giving up with a laugh, the man tugging himself over the finish line, or the old wank-in-mouth compromise. Because—listen close, junior—virtually no woman on Earth can get a man to cum *purely* by mouthwork. I know a few who can. I can provide numbers. But they're unicorns, rare as honesty at a shareholder meeting."

He leaned forward, the weight of the moment suddenly heavier than the cheese on his plate. "But you're not asking the real question, kid."

Nathan paused, sipped again, and let the silence hang like a guillotine over the boy's neck.

Nathan leaned back, swirled the Pinot as if the answer itself might be hiding in the sediment, and then fixed the boy with the kind of stare normally reserved for defendants in court.

"The question you're missing is, kid," he said, voice dry as parchment, "*who* would you like a blowjob from? Or, if we're humoring the delicate souls who ache at a sentence ending with a preposition—*from whom* would you like a blowjob?"

He let the grammar lesson sink in like a dagger twisted slowly.

"Because, boy oh boy, there is a difference. A blowjob in the abstract is just physics—lips, tongue,

suction, like a Hoover with warmer upholstery. But specify the giver?" He jabbed the air with his finger. "That's where it gets real. A stranger in a bar bathroom? An ex who still smells of betrayal? Your high school crush who now sells real estate in Des Moines? Or the woman who once sang lullabies to your child and is now humming against your zipper? You see the gulf?"

He drained the last of his glass, set it down like a judge's gavel.
"A blowjob isn't the *what*. It's the *who*. That's the difference between a snack and a sacrament."

Nathan refilled his glass, took a slow sip, and began as if he were opening a lecture at the Sorbonne.

"So, would one like a blowjob from a Gen Z twenty-two-year-old? Of course. Who wouldn't? Fresh teeth, tight cheeks, the enthusiasm of someone who thinks three months of OnlyFans subscriptions

equals sexual PhDs. Would it lead anywhere? Not sexually. She's got zero chance of getting the job done unless she's been field-trained by someone her mother's age. But—" he wagged a finger, savoring the but—"she'd be silent enough for you to enjoy the pure suckling soundtrack, without trying to interrupt with half-words that only pass for language by sheer pretense."

He dabbed his mouth with a napkin, courtly as an executioner cleaning his axe.
"Now, from a sixty-year-old? Same thing, structurally speaking. But with knowledge. Knowledge of her knees, for one. She'll put a pillow under them without needing to be asked, or better yet, she'll flip the script and make you lie back while she does the work with seasoned efficiency. No nonsense, no cartilage regrets."

He tapped the bottle's neck against the glass.
"And everything in between? Here's where it gets

interesting. Because the smarter the conversation, the quicker you cum—just to get through the messy part so you can return to what actually makes sense: talking. Or better yet, you make her cum first, eat her out until she's halfway to God, and then keep talking after. Her thighs trembling, your chin slick, both of you parsing the universe between kisses. That's the real continuum. Not age. *Conversation.*"

He looked at the boy, almost mercifully, and muttered:
"And now, lad, you may at last begin to glimpse why you still don't get it."

And it was then—mid-sentence, mid-sermon, mid-Pinot—that Nathan caught the flicker of betrayal. Not the ancient, operatic kind—daggers, poison chalices—but the modern: a little red light on a phone. The kid had been filming him.

Nathan didn't flinch. Horror, after all, is a genre, and he had always considered himself ugly enough to qualify as set dressing. But then his eyes caught the caption the boy had typed across the recording: **"Old macho culture and it's crazy ideas."**

"It's," he whispered, like a priest handling a desecrated wafer. Apostrophe-s, goddamn it. His throat clenched. He gulped down the glass of Pinot, then abandoned glassware altogether and drank straight from the bottle, savage swigs, as if wine itself might erase the apostrophe.

He tried. He really did. He forced himself to swallow civility, to drown restraint in Merlot tannins. But then—it snapped. Slowly, deliberately, he reached down, unlaced his mountain boot. He lifted it, weighed it in his palm like a medieval flail, studied its gravity, its promise. Then, with the solemnity of a man committing both crime and liturgy, he

gripped the boot by the toe and swung it in a perfect arc.

The heel struck the young man flush on the temple. A blunt punctuation mark. The boy toppled sideways, chair collapsing, phone skittering across the floor, recording still running—capturing Nathan framed in lamplight like some ruinous deity.

Nathan exhaled, heavy. No words. Only Garfunkel in the background, trembling through the room: *…how can the light that burned so brightly / suddenly burn so pale?*